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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some of the practical ways by which students can be given information about the adequacy of their responding. The author views this information as all that is frequently necessary to alter an inappropriate behavior. Thus, he considers feedback to be the first step in most behavior management programs. Studies to determine how often children in average classrooms are given feedback are discussed in relation to the posited needs for individual positive feedback and positive descriptive feedback. (SJL)

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FEEDBACK IN BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

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FEEDBACK IN BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

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Several years ago as a graduate student, I came across a paper that claimed to have discovered a new phenomena in psychology. It was called"super conditioning" and was supposed to be a boon to behavior modification. Closer inspection revealed that "super-conditioning" was simply another name for negative reinforcement. What was "super" about it was its resistance to extinction. More recently, I saw a paper comparing the effects of "overcorrection" to those of punishment. Both of these papers distressed me as has some of the recent publicity given to feedback. The problem, as I see it, is that all these are examples of psychologists defining variables without regard to the function they play.

In the limited sense feedback can be difined as information given the subject about the adequacy of his response. However, the hallmark of scientific psychology is its use of functional definitions. That is, something is a positive reinforcer if its contingent addition has as a consequence an increase in the probability of the behavior on which it is contingent; a negative reinforcer if its contingent removal has a similar consequence; and a punisher if its contingent presentation has as its consequence a decrease in the probability of the behavior upon which it is contingent.

As Premack has demonstrated activities (eating an M&M, riding a bicycle, being spanked) are not in and of themselves reinforcers

or punishers. They take on that value only in relation to other available alternative activities. Asking the questions is"over-correction" more effective than punishment or is feedback positive reinforcement has no place in a scientific psychology. For "overcorrection" as it is usually used is merely one type of punishment and feedback depending upon the consequences it has on the behavior upon which it is contingent can function as a negative reinforcer, punisher, positive reinforcer (or none of these). Indeed a quick persual of recent issues of JABA will uncover instances of information given the subject about the adequacy of his responses functioning as all three.

Although the theoretical questions of "what is" feedback lead to terminological confusion and dead ends, the practical problems of in what ways can information given to subjects about the adequacy of their responding produce more effective and/or efficient behavior modification programs are crucial. Towards this end we have begun a series of studies.

One of the first things we wanted to determine was how often children in average classrooms were given feedback. We divided feedback into positive and punishing (not in terms of the function they played--that was what we were interested in finding out--but in terms of the function the teacher meant them to play). We further divided feedback into descriptive and non-descriptive (depending upon how much information was given). Much to our chagrin, we discovered that teachers seldom give individual positive feedback of any kind. And one could

grow old while waiting for instances of positive descriptive feedback.

We have continued this research in order to discover what sort of pupil behaviors are related to positive feedback from teachers. Our data while not yet complete are interesting. We have found that disruptive children are more likely to get positive feedback (usually praise) then well behaved children, and that positive feedback, although rare, is only loosely correlated to appropriate behavior.

In connection with this research we have also discovered that even teachers with whom the importance of positive feedback is stressed tend, if not monitored, to decrease their praise with the introduction of a successful token reinforcement program. They tend to withdraw from classroom administration and let the token system take over. For these reasons we strongly recommend that teachers be monitored (perhaps by their pupils) on the amount of feedback they deliver and how much of it is descriptive in nature. We believe that descriptive feedback serves as a prompt to temporarily alter the probability of the prompted behavior so that other reinforcers can be applied to it or (in the case of a behavior one wants to decrease) a more appropriate alternative.

Another area in which we have made use of feedback is in the withdrawal of token reinforcement programs. One of the ways we have done this is through what we call feedback systems.

After a classroom has been successfully controlled by a token system, the backup reinforcers are removed while the rest of the token program remains intact. Tokens are still contingently

delivered but they no longer have purchasing power. Our experience indicates that if this procedure is used classroom behavior can be maintained at much more appropriate levels than if the entire system is abruptly withdrawn. Our studies with child administered token economies also indicate that even very disruptive children can give one another appropriate feedback using this method of withdrawal.

Another way in which we have been looking at feedback as a method of withdrawal from classroom token systems has been in self control token programs. In these, a child is taught to match the amount of points his teacher has given him. If he is correct within one he is allowed to spend the amount of tokens he awarded himself. Gradually his chances of being checked by the teacher are reduced until he is completely on his own. We have shown in several classrooms that appropriate behavior will be maintained even though the children are no longer monitored by the teacher and could receive the maximum number of points while returning to their disruptive behavior.

In the future we will combine the self control and feedback programs and attempt to use self feedback to gradually withdraw backup reinforcers from children who are laready functioning on the self control program. We will begin by making one token interval a feedback only interval and slowly switch the system until the opportunity to earn backup reinforcers has been eliminated.

A final note on feedback in behavior modification, which we tried to make in a recent paper with that title, is that

sometimes information as to the adequacy of s subjects response may be all that is necessary to alter an inappropriate behavior. We believe that feedback in this sense should be the first step in most behavior management programs. If this were done, we think that we would see less negative publicity attached to the term "behavior modification". Perhaps a model that future behavioral clinicians should adopt is "never use a cannon where a B.B. Gun will do."